DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 972 EC 302 442

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TITLE Teaching Adolescents with Behavioral/Emotional Disorders, Adolescent Offenders, and Adolescents At-Risk: A Literature-Based Approach.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (71st, San Antonio, TX, April 5-9, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Behavior Disorders; Curriculum; Delinquency; *Emotional Disturbances; High Risk Students; High Schools; High School Students; Learning Activities; Novels; *Reader Response; Reader Text Relationship; *Reading Programs; *Self Concept; Short Stories; Student Development; Whole Language Approach

ABSTRACT

The Literature Project is a literature-based reading program designed to meet the needs of adolescent females with behavioral/emotional disorders, adolescent female offenders, and adolescent females at risk. The project uses novels and short stories written by and for women as basic reading material. Literary selections with heroines who are self-reliant and confident and who accomplish goals against difficult circumstances are used to improve the adolescents' self-concepts. Selection criteria for the literature include: produce a vicarious experience in the adolescents; change the adolescents' self-concepts, their future aspirations, or their attitudes; provide a story relevant to the adolescents' lives; and allow the adolescents to identify with and learn from the heroine. The literary selections are read orally by the teacher and students as a group. Group and individual activities that reinforce the ideas and concepts covered in the novel accompany each reading selection. The 50 adolescents that have participated in the project have improved their self-concepts and self-confidence. (Contains 31 references.) (JDD)

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ED 361 972

Teaching Adolescents with Behavioral Emotional Disorders, Adolescent Offenders, and Adolescents At-Risk: A Literature-Based Approach

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Abstract

It can be a challenging job to find a reading program that holds the interest of adolescents with behavioral emotional disorders, adolescent offenders, and adolescents at-risk. The Literature Project is a literature-based reading program that was designed to meet the needs of the adolescent females in these groups. In the Literature Project novels and short stories written by and for women are used as the basic reading material in reading programs for these females. Literary selections with heroines who are self-reliant, confident, and accomplish goals against difficult circumstances are used to improve the adolescents' self-concepts and perceptions of themselves. In the Literature Project, all novels are read orally by the teacher and students as a group in a quiet setting. Activities that reinforce the ideas and concepts covered in the novel accompany each reading selection. The 50 adolescents that have participated in the Literature Project so far have improved their self-concepts and increased their confidence in themselves. The Literature Project is an exciting and effective addition to the curriculum options currently available for females in these populations.

Teaching Adolescents with Behavioral/Emotional Disorders, Adolescent Offenders, and Adolescents At-Risk: A Literature-Based Approach

Adolescents with emotional or behavioral disorders come to school with a variety of needs and may be experiencing numerous difficulties in their lives. It is not uncommon to read about sexual and physical abuse, suicide, truancy, pregnancy, drug abuse, and prostitution in the confidential school files of such students. With all of the stresses and problems facing these youth, how can teachers motivate them to read? When traditional reading programs have failed to captivate adolescents with emotional or behavioral disorders, what next? The answer lies in a literature-based reading program.

The Literature Project is a literature-based reading program in which novels and short stories are used to supplement the basic reading material. In particular, the Literature Project was designed to focus on the needs of adolescent females with behavioral/emotional disorders. Literary selections with heroines who are self-reliant, confident, and accomplish goals against difficult circumstances are used to improve adolescents females' self-concepts and perceptions of themselves as women. Specially selected literature about women in difficult life situations provides adolescents with characters from whom they can learn positive attitudes.

Using literature as a psycho-educational intervention technique is not new. Identification with characters in stories has been used to improve the self-perceptions of individuals with mental retardation (Kantrowitz, 1967), prevent self-concept problems with children in difficult family situations (Sheridan, Baker, and de Lissovoy, 1984), reduce tension and improve adjustment of children with emotional problems (Olsen, 1975; Russell and Russell, 1979), improve the self-

concept of students with learning disabilities (Gerber & Harris,1983; Lindsey & Frith,1981), and to enrich curriculum for students who are gifted (Schlichter, 1989). Literature has also been used to help children cope with abuse (Carla, 1978; Randolph & Gredler, 1985; Watson, 1980), and adults adjust to incarceration (Cellini & Young, 1976).

The Literature Project Curriculum

In the development of the Literature Project curriculum, the adolescents themselves are used as the "curricular informants," a practice employed in the whole language approach to reading (Cullinan, 1990). That is, the adolescent females' needs are analyzed to insure that the novels chosen address the concerns and life experiences of the young women. The selected novels revolve around women or girl heroines who exemplify such qualities as hope, perseverance, courage, self-reliance, loyalty, tolerance, warmth, independence, and intelligence. In most of the novels, the female heroines overcome difficult circumstances to become independent and confident. Contemporary and relevant themes with which the adolescents are well acquainted, such as homelessness, physical and sexual abuse, being runaways or throwaways, dysfunctional family relationships, and discrimination are evident in the novels in the Literature Project curriculum (Table 1). The emphasis throughout the Project is on improving the adolescents' self-concepts and increasing their confidence, and giving them realistic models of women who have successfully coped with adverse circumstances. The readability of the books in the Literature Project ranges from fifth to tenth grade, as tested by the Fry readability formula (Fry, 1968).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The Literature Project curriculum is not static, but adaptable to the specific needs of the adolescents who participate. Criteria to assist the teacher in choosing the novels for the Literature Project include the potential of the selection to: a) produce a vicarious experience in the adolescents; b) change the adolescents' perception of themselves, their self-concepts, their future aspirations, or their attitudes; c) provide a story relevant to the adolescents' lives; and d) allow the adolescents to identify with and learn from the heroine.

Procedure

To begin, the teacher chooses a novel from a list of suitable selections. In preparation to teach the novel, the teacher reads through the book and designates daily points at which to begin and end. In the Literature Project, all novels are read orally by the teacher and students as a group in a quiet setting. The time devoted to reading and the amount read each day will depend on the attention spans of the adolescents, their reading levels, and the content of the novel.

Next, activities are developed that accompany each day's reading. The daily activities should reinforce the concepts covered in the novel that day. Through the activities, the adolescents are provided an opportunity to discuss the ideas and events in the day's selection and relate these to their own lives. Role-playing, writing, drama, art, and music can be incorporated into the activities (Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

Monitoring Progress

The focus of the Literature Project should reflect the needs of the adolescents who are participating, therefore, the goals and objectives of each implementation of the Literature Project will be different. A pre- posttest format is

used to measure students' progress toward goals and objectives. An interview with each student, a self-concept test, or a teacher-made test on the content and theme of the novel and the Literature Project goals ar the elements of the pre- and posttesting. An alternative type of monitoring system, one that might be more adaptable to the classroom, would be journal writing by the adolescents. The teacher would then do a content analysis of the journals, and dialogue with the students through the journals, in order to assess progress of the participants.

After reading each selection in the Literature Project, the adolescents fill out the Literature Project Evaluation Form (LPEF). The LPEF includes such questions as: "Did you enjoy reading this book? Why or why not?"; "What did you learn about yourself from this book?"; "What did you learn about women from this book?"; and "Who was your favorite character and why?". The LPEF assists the teacher in gaining an insight into how the adolescents are affected by the reading selection. The data gathered from the LPEF also assists the teacher in evaluating the effectiveness of the novel.

Evaluation

Since 1988, fifty adolescent females with behavioral emotional disorders, adolescent offenders, and adolescents at-risk disabilities have participated in the Literature Project.. Adolescent females in the ninth through twelfth grades were included in the Literature Project (mean grade:10.0). The adolescents' reading achievement grade levels ranged from 1.0 to post-high school, with a mean reading grade of 6.1. The participants' ages ranged from 14-10 to 18-6 years old, with a mean age of 15-1. Many of the adolescents who participated had drug and alcohol

problems. Over half the young women had histories of sexual or physical abuse. Several of the adolescents had threatened and attempted suicide.

The focus of Literature Project was on improving the adolescents' self-concepts, their independence, and their perception of themselves as young women. From the information gained through the interviews with the adolescents, the themes and characters in The Color Purple (Walker, 1982) and Izzy, Willy Nilly (Voight, 1986) were identified by three English teachers as appropriate for the adolescents interests and the purpose of the Literature Project. The epistolary form and short chapters, as well as the interest in the film, made the The Color Purple easy and inviting to read. Celie's (main character) letters give a "real-life" intensity to the book, which was motivating to the adolescents. The characters in The Color Purple experience poverty, physical and sexual abuse, loneliness, family conflicts, and anger, conditions with which these adolescents were well acquainted. Despite the depressing and negative emotions depicted in the book, the positive themes of hope, perseverance, love, loyalty, and happiness occur throughout the story.

Izzy, Willy Nilly was chosen because of the adolescents' experiences with drinking alcohol and drunken driving. The main character in this book undergoes a transformation when she becomes the victim in a tragic drunk driving accident. The book provides extremely warm and sensitive passages about growing up, life, love, and friendships.

All of the adolescents that took part in the Literature Project volunteered to read on a regular basis, even those with severe reading problems. A number of activities were employed in both groups to draw the adolescents into discussion and promote reflection on the novels' events and characters. During The Color Purple,

the adolescents drew a silhouette of Celie, the main character. As the novel progressed and Celie grew and developed into an independent woman, the adolescents changed and enhanced the silhouette to reflect the character's development. In an activity related to Izzy, Willy Nilly, the adolescents drew a timeline, with the main events of the novel designated along the timeline. The timeline was referred to and displayed in the classroom throughout the duration of the Literature Project.

In a pre- posttest format, the adolescents were administered the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale, "The Way I Feel About Myself" (Piers & Harris, 1969), interviewed individually, and completed a teacher-made test related to the adolescents' goals and the content and theme of the novel they read. The LPEF was administered after reading the novels.

Results

There was a significant difference between the pre- and posttest scores of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale ($t(10)=4.275$, $p<.01$). The adolescents' self-concept scores significantly improved following the Literature Project. The data from the interviews, teacher-made tests, and LPEF indicated that reading and discussing the novels influenced the adolescents' self-concepts and perceptions of themselves as women. When asked what they learned about women from the book, some of the comments included: "They (women) have to fight to survive"; "You got to stand up for yourself"; and "I learned that when your [sic] a woman you can stick up for yourself and you don't have to be pushed around. You can fight back".

Despite the adolescents' seemingly overwhelming life problems, they showed a wonderful sense of hope and determination after finishing the reading selections: "I learned a lot about what happened to me in a similar way to what happened to Celie. It was a really good feeling to no [sic] that women can fight for their rights," and "It taught me to never give up. That if you give up you're giving up on yourself."

The adolescents also reflected on their values and attitudes, as seen in their comments on the LPEF: "I learned that I'm pretty assertive and not at all prejudiced"; "I learned that women are shy and need to learn how to fight for themselves"; and "They [women] have to take care of each other".

All of the adolescents, in their interviews and teacher-made tests, expressed a wish to participate in another Literature Project. Many of them felt that it was the most valuable and interesting activity they had participated in during school.

Conclusion

Providing motivating and interesting reading programs for adolescents with behavioral/emotional disorders, adolescent offenders, and adolescents at-risk. The Literature Project is an effective and exciting addition to the curriculum options currently available for these adolescents. Although these adolescents have been the focus of the Literature Project to date, it is a potentially valuable and interesting approach to teaching reading for all students, males and females, elementary and secondary, those with disabilities and those without. A well planned literature-based reading program that addresses a variety of contemporary and relevant issues through new and old classics can effect change in students' perceptions of themselves as capable and talented women, an outcome that will help adolescents

with behavioral emotional disorders, adolescent offenders, and adolescents at-risk realize a brighter future.

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Table 1

Descriptions and themes of the novels used in the Literature Project curriculum.

Novel	Description/Theme
Annapurna: A Woman's Place	Womens' achievements
Gorillas in the Mist	Love of career, ecology
The Clan of The Cave Bears	Independence, evolution
A Yellow Raft in Blue Waters	Minorities, identity
The Blue Sword	Identity, independence
Home Before Dark	Homelessness, loyalty
Midnight Hour Encores	Mother-daughter relations
Rainbow Jordan	Family, abandonment
Arilla Sun Down	Minorities, identity
Rear-View Mirrors	Identity, family relations
Julie of the Wolves	Independence, ecology
The Solitary	Independence, self-reliance
Izzy, Willy-Nilly	Self-understanding, identity
I'm Not Your Other Half	Identity, self-determination
Touching	Family relations, alcoholism
Homecoming	Homelessness, self-reliance

Table 2

Literature Project Activities

Activity	Type
draw a picture of favorite scene	group or individual
dramatize a section of the novel	group
write a script with a different ending	group or individual
choose a song that exemplifies main character, scenes from the novel; listen to and analyze.	group and individual
identify emotions, feelings in novel; cut out or draw pictures that depict those emotions; make collage.	group or individual
develop an "I am good enough" chart; add to when opportunity arises in reading; display.	group or individual
play "the character is missing" by inventing an additional	

Table 2 (continued)

character to write into the novel.	group or individual
write a letter to the main character	group or individual
dress like a character in the novel	group or individual
role-play significant scenes:	
discuss.	group